

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

edited by
sous la direction de

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Mass Media and the End of Innocence: Rousseau's Warnings in *Emile* and in the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*

Jean Bethke Elshtain begins her recent book *Democracy on Trial* acknowledging that having recently become a grandmother she finds herself a member of the 'nervous' generation. I have not yet become a grandmother but am the same age as Elshtain and share her nervousness. Two things make me particularly nervous these days—the fate of our nation's children and the future of citizenship in this country.

We live in a world in which, as Neil Postman points out in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, twelve and thirteen-year-old girls are among the highest paid models in America and the rate of serious crime committed by juveniles has risen over eleven thousand percent in less than forty years.¹ Children are as well-versed as their parents in the varieties of sexual experience, the details of the O.J. Simpson case, and scenes from *Pulp Fiction*; and in both inner cities and outer suburbs young people use sophisticated weapons to murder each other in cold blood, often simply to obtain commodities as trivial as bracelets and sneakers (*New York Times*, 5/15/94).

Perhaps less terrifying but more pervasive than the dangers threatening childhood are the signs of cynicism and despair that threaten civic life. Low voter turnout, overflowing prisons, hate-talk on the radio and on college campuses, linguistic skepticism in the academy, and the prevalence of what Christopher Lasch in his recent book *The Revolt of the Elites* refers to as the obliteration of 'public trust' all suggest that citizenship, like childhood, is under siege.²

In attempting to understand these troublesome changes in our public culture it occurs to me that what we are witnessing is the disappearance from childhood and from civic life of what, at the risk of sounding moralistic, one might call 'innocence.' First in its religious form and later in a more secular form, the concept of innocence has

¹Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, (NY: Delacorte Press, 1982), 3.

²Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, (NY: W.W. Norton, 1995), 99-100.

exerted a powerful hold over the Western mind, particularly in the United States, for the past three centuries. In our post-modern present, however, the whole notion of innocence is mocked or ignored. Indeed, given the direction and pace of technological progress, innocence may have become obsolete.

If one were to write a modern history of the idea of innocence, clearly the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau would figure largely in that history, particularly with regards to the ways that innocence has been identified with childhood and with citizenship. Although Rousseau's own personal quest for innocence was highly problematical (as his *Confessions*, *Reveries*, and *Dialogues* make clear), his seductive portraits of childhood as a separate sphere with its own limited knowledge and of citizenship as an association of equals gathered together to promote the common good helped to create a dual legacy that until recently continued to resonate with meaning.

Most important for our purposes today, Rousseau was prescient in his analysis of what would eventually cause the innocence of the child and of the citizen to disappear. In *Emile* Rousseau warns against exposing a young child to arbitrary authorities and public opinion through the medium of books; in the *Letter to d'Alembert* he argues that to preserve their civic innocence the Genevans must keep morally corruptive 'spectacles' away from their city. While he obviously could not have foreseen the proliferation of mass media that have invaded our lives in the last half of the 20th century (when electronically generated 'public opinion' and 'theater' together form a constant presence in every home), Rousseau's concern about the effect of the media on various forms of secular innocence was, I believe, prophetic.

Before exploring these themes in more detail I would like to acknowledge some problematical ambiguities in my use of the word 'innocence.' Innocence can refer to purity of heart, blamelessness, and freedom from sin or guilt; it can also refer to simple-mindedness, naïveté, and ignorance. In what follows I will generally be using innocence in its more benign sense as purity and harmlessness rather than in its more negative sense as naïveté or stupidity. I admit that to focus on the positive meaning of innocence may be naïve on my part—although ever since Jacques Derrida's 1976 critique of Lévi-Strauss's debt to Rousseau it is hard to be too innocent about the use of innocence.³ I also recognize that much harm has been done by the nostalgia for innocence. Nevertheless I will suggest that, at this point in our history, far more dangerous for

³Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 105-118.

our future than naïveté is cynicism—a quality which may be defined as the belief that no innocence is possible.

Rousseau himself has often been accused of celebrating the simple-minded form of innocence, and his view of human nature has frequently been attacked for ignoring the pervasiveness of evil in human life. But one issue Rousseau was not naïve about is the fragility of innocence. In *Emile* Rousseau makes it clear that his educational goals are only workable given a healthy child who is born into relatively stable circumstances; in his writings on the *Social Contract* and on Poland and Corsica he emphasizes repeatedly that civic innocence is likewise a rare and delicate plant—the product of privileged climates and fortuitous histories. Rousseau's frequent recognition of how easily innocence can be corrupted should absolve him from the charge of naïveté on this score.

Obviously implicit in innocent's double meanings as both purity and ignorance is the recognition that knowledge can be harmful and, by extension, that there are realms of life that ought to be protected from that knowledge. At present, however, the idea of limiting knowledge's accessibility is contrary both to the dominant ideological assumptions of modern Western liberalism and, more importantly, to the technological realities of an electronically internetted age. The striking fact of today's 'Third Wave' world is that theoretically, at least, all knowledge is available to everyone. Thus while I admit to be approaching the social artifact of innocence nostalgically, I hope to avoid suggesting any hope for innocence's return. Largely due to the technologies that have spun off from the invention of the electrical telegraph, innocence as Rousseau constructed it was part of a world that has now disappeared. Instead, what we must finally ask ourselves, especially in regard to childhood and citizenship, is what the future will bring to replace innocence.

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Rousseau begins *Emile* with the advice to mothers that they 'form an enclosure around [their] child's soul at an early date' and counsels them to 'build a fence' to protect their offspring from the busy highway nearby (38; IV: 246). Although *Emile*'s archtypical mother quickly fades from view and is replaced by the shrewd and resourceful tutor Jean-Jacques, the image of *Emile* growing up within a protected zone that shelters him from the crowded highways of cosmopolitan life remains vivid throughout the entire book. Even when *Emile* is introduced to carefully-chosen settings in the outside world (farmer Robert's garden, a local fair, a rich man's home), the 'fence' around *Emile*'s soul is never really broken and the sphere of childhood remains intact.

What specifically is it in the child that 'the fence' is meant to

protect? To answer this question requires a quick overview of the basic tenets of Rousseauian psychology. Underlying every pedagogical choice in *Emile* is Rousseau's firm belief in the primacy of *amour de soi*—a harmless instinct of self-love that enables a human being to survive without hostility or aggression. In Book IV Rousseau states that *amour de soi* is an innate human passion 'anterior to every other, and of which all others are in a sense only modifications' (212-213; IV: 491); and in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* he describes this instinct as 'a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to watch over its own preservation, and which directed in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue' (3:91; III: 219). This primary form of innocent self-love, however, inevitably comes under threat from *amour-propre*, a secondary, more egotistical form of self-love, as soon as the developing child becomes aware of his effects on others:

[*Amour de soi*], which regards only our selves, is contented when our true needs are satisfied. But *amour-propre*, which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because [it] also demands others to prefer us to themselves, which is impossible.... Thus what makes man essentially good is to have few needs and to compare himself little to others; what makes him essentially wicked is to have many needs and to depend very much on opinion (213-214; IV: 493).

'It is in order to find ways to prevent this from happening that I have written my book,' Rousseau explains in his letter to Beaumont defending *Emile* (IV: 937).

The overarching purpose of *Emile's* education, then, may be seen as an attempt to nurture the innocent instincts of *amour de soi* and to delay and sublimate the harmful instincts of *amour-propre*. Since *amour-propre* is activated by external stimuli, controlling the kinds of stimuli that confront the child is crucial. An early precaution will be to keep all items of luxury away from *Emile's* protected sphere. Luxuries soften us; they prevent us from exercising and extending our own strengths and thereby make us relatively weak, dependent, and envious of others. It is this envy and resentment that foster aggressiveness in the child; for, as Rousseau states with profound psychological acuity, 'All wickedness comes from weakness' (67; IV: 288). Accordingly *Emile* will be surrounded by crude objects from the country, and whenever possible will be encouraged to make his own toys and tools for himself. Similar reasoning lies behind Rousseau's prohibitions regarding the art forms that might stimulate *Emile's* imagination. Happiness, like strength, is a relative quality: we are happiest when our desires are in equilibrium with our power to satisfy those desires: 'Unhappiness consists not in the privation of things but in the need that is felt for them.... The real world has its limits; the imaginary world is finite. Unable to enlarge the one let

us restrict the other, for it is from the difference between the two alone that are born all the pains which make us truly unhappy' (81; IV: 304-305). In contrast to the plethora of media fantasies that stimulate insatiable new needs in today's children, Emile's educational setting encourages direct interaction with his immediate environment; his imagination is limited to the here and now. Otherworldly stories and fantastical works of art will be kept outside of the fence that surrounds Emile.

The young child will likewise be protected from the corrupting influence of books. Books share with other forms of art the danger of overcharging the imagination; they also threaten to imbue the wrong moral messages, even when the intention of the book or story is moralistic. Rousseau spells out this danger in the second stage of Emile's education when he warns parents and teachers to avoid introducing the young child to the *Fables* of La Fontaine: 'instead of looking within themselves for the shortcoming that one wants to cure or prevent, [children] tend to like the vice with which one takes advantage of others' shortcomings.' In the fable of the fox and the crow, for example, 'children make fun of the crow, but they all take a fancy to the fox.... It is the choice of *amour-propre*' (115; IV: 356). 'I ask you,' Rousseau demands with a note of sarcasm that might give modern readers pause, 'whether it is necessary to teach six-year-old children that there are men who flatter and lie for profit.'

The innocence of the Rousseauian child portrayed in *Emile* has become the stuff of history. In his essay on 'Rousseau and Modernity' Joseph Featherstone explores the complex and multi-layered influence of *Emile* on Anglo-American Romanticism, particularly as Romanticism was expressed in ideals and assumptions about education and child-rearing. 'From Rousseau on,' he argues, 'an important line of social, political, and educational criticism has contrasted the dividedness and deadness of modern life with the child's wholeness and wholeheartedness.'⁴ Although Featherstone expresses skepticism about the tendency to sentimentalize childhood innocence, he recognizes that such constructs held a compelling attraction for 'counter-modernists' from the Progressive Era up through the 1970's.

In our post-modern, media-saturated present, however, the Progressive Age's romanticization of childhood sounds archaic. In place of the innocent being of Rousseau's idyll, today's child is sheltered from the elements but dressed in black and exposed to a barrage of

⁴Joseph Featherstone, 'Rousseau and Modernity,' *Daedalus* (Summer, 1978), 167-192 at 172.

electronically-generated images virtually indistinguishable from the information available to adults. Due to the predominating presence in today's children's lives of a completely open electronic technology to which there are no physical, economic, cognitive, or imaginative restraints, the six-year old and the sixty-year old have access to the same information.⁵ As children plug into the internet, the effort to keep them away from the information 'highway' will become even more futile. Rousseau's dictum that 'childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it' (90; IV: 319) ceases to ring true when the 'fence' protecting childhood no longer exists.

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The pedagogical program for protecting childhood innocence that lies at the core of *Emile* can provide a useful frame for the arguments concerning civic innocence that underlie Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater*. As is true in *Emile*, the aim of the *Letter* is not to censor knowledge. It is a question not of silencing harmful voices but of preventing Genevan citizens from hearing them, not of prohibiting certain images but of keeping them out of sight. Like the metaphorical fence that preserves the innocence of *Emile*, the actual walls that surround Geneva should insure that the Genevan citizens are protected from the cosmopolitan corruptions just beyond the border.

Early in the *Letter* Rousseau lays out his basic assumptions about the native goodness of his would-be compatriots. Restating the psychological paradigm that undergirds the themes of the *Discourse on Inequality* and *Emile*, he ridicules the notion that the theater can make men virtuous: 'even if I am again to be regarded as wicked for daring to assert that man is born good, I think it and believe I have proved it. The source of the concern which attaches us to what is decent ... is in us and not in the plays' (23; V: 22).

On the very next page, however, he reminds us how vulnerable this innocent form of self-love is to the more competitive drives of *amour-propre*: 'The heart of man is always right concerning that which has no personal relation to himself... But when our [self] interest is involved, our sentiments are soon corrupted. And it is only then that we prefer the evil which is useful to us to the good that nature makes us love' (24; V: 22).

Given the fragility of human innocence, it is easy to see why Rousseau would warn against exposing the Genevans to the kinds of

⁵Postman, 84.

luxuries associated with theatrical life. '[I]t is to [the effects of the theater] that the ... Genevans attribute the taste for luxury, adornment, and dissipation, whose introduction among us they rightly fear' (57; V: 53). Thus far, Rousseau tells us, the Genevans have remained an unsophisticated, frugal, hardworking, virile, and free people. But if they were encouraged to develop a taste for the frivolous trappings of the theater, they could become lazy and dissatisfied, envious and dependent, eventually as corrupted as the inhabitants of a large city.

Here the dynamics of *amour-propre* have civic as well as psychological consequences, for 'this very amusement which provides a means of economy for the rich, doubly weakens the poor, either by a real increase in expenses or by less zeal for work.' As a result, Rousseau warns his readers, a theater would tend 'everywhere to promote and increase the inequality of fortunes.' In a monarchy such inequality might be a matter of indifference, but 'in a democracy, in which the subjects and the sovereign are only the same men considered in different relations, as soon as the smaller number wins out in riches over the greater number, the state must perish or change its form' (115; V: 105). Again such warnings strike a sensitive nerve, and we are prompted to speculate about the degree to which the media in our own time have contributed to the growing gap between rich and poor.

As with his advice regarding Emile, Rousseau is in general concerned about corrupting the Genevans' imagination, and he writes compellingly of the effect on human consciousness of imagery that dulls compassion and arouses hate. Since the ultimate purpose of any theater is to attract an audience, he argues, it cannot afford to present words or images that might make us uncomfortable. Rather 'the principal object is to please.... To please [people] there must be entertainments which promote their penchants, whereas what is needed are entertainments which would moderate them' (18; V: 17). Thus the theater or any kind of mass media cannot instruct, even though it may claim to do so; on the contrary it can only stroke our *amour-propre* in increasingly seductive ways. Truly instructive theater would be boring.

Along with the theater's necessary arousal of *amour-propre* comes a corresponding stifling of *amour de soi*, particularly the benign component of *amour de soi* that enables us to feel compassion for others. 'Plays are certainly dangerous in that they accustom the eyes of the people to horrors that they ought not even to know and to crimes they ought not to suppose possible' (33; V: 30), Rousseau asserts, anticipating the well-documented link between today's crime rate and violence on television; and then with what to us would be considered almost laughable understatement he adds, 'It is not even true that murder and parricide are always hateful in the theater' (33; V: 30).

For a republic such as Geneva, as for the child Emile, harmful media not only inflame dangerous passions and dull useful ones but may contain moral messages that are the opposite of what they ostensibly intend to be. In a critique of the comedies of Molière that bears striking similarity to his critique of the fables of La Fontaine, Rousseau argues that 'although criminals are punished, they are presented to us in so favorable a light that our sympathies are entirely with them' (29; V: 27); indeed, 'who does not himself become a thief for a minute in being concerned about him?' (46; V: 43) Thus while it may have been well-intended, in fact Molière's drama is 'a school of vices and bad morals' (34; V: 32). The medium subverts the message.

Finally, underlying Rousseau's extended critique of the inconsistencies in Molière's *Misanthrope* is the acknowledgement that true innocence can not possibly be shown on the stage. Rousseau argues that Alceste's hatred of human vice really reveals him to be a lover of human virtue. 'Hence it is not of men that he is the enemy, but of the viciousness of some and the support this viciousness finds in the others' (38; V: 35). And yet if the *Misanthrope* were true to character—if he were consistently a good man who loves and trusts his fellow creatures—he would never attract an audience, for 'so much righteousness is very uncomfortable' (38; V: 35). Innocence in the theater is a contradiction in terms. If the Genevans wish to retain their habits of industry, frugality, and civic virtue, they must keep theatrical entertainments away from their city.

Historically Rousseau's portrayals of civic innocence have exerted at least as much of a pull on the modern imagination as has his portrait of Emile. In his Epilogue to *Rousseau, Dreamer of Democracy* James Miller traces the compelling though often problematic career of the Rousseauian conception of direct democracy from the sans culottes of 1794 through the Paris Commune of 1871 to attempts at direct self-rule in Spain in 1936 and, by implication to 'the democracy in the streets' of the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ With comparable aims, Benjamin Barber's argument for a less-mediated form of 'strong democracy' calls for a return to the Rousseauian and Jeffersonian stress on direct participation and ongoing, civic responsibility. The continuing use, even in the electronic age, of the vocabulary of 'town meetings,' 'grassroots organizing,' and 'citizen legislators' attests to the lasting power of the Rousseauian civic vision.

Embedded in much of the contemporary nostalgia for Rousseauian forms of citizenship is a recognition that excessive mediation has

⁶James Miller, *Rousseau, Dreamer of Democracy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), fn. 10, p. 257; 207-209.

spoiled public life. As early as 1961 Daniel Boorstin, in a very Rousseauian mode, attacked the corrupting influence that the mass media's 'images', 'celebrities' and 'pseudoevents' have had on American politics and culture.⁷ More recently Christopher Lasch reminisced eloquently about the political vitality during the era of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, contrasting that era's engaged citizenry with today's symbolic analysts who dwell in borderless, electronically-mediated environments with no concern for family, community, or face-to-face debate. I would agree with these and other recent critics (see, e.g. the work of Sven Birkerts, Barry Sanders, Jerry Mander) that the communications revolution has transformed our lives irrevocably and that we have lost something precious in the process. The electronic age has put childhood and civic innocence in a double jeopardy: not only have the media insinuated themselves into every human action, but no 'walls' remain impermeable to the media's reach. In a world not just of televisions and computers but of fax machines, cellular phones, and camcorders, nothing remains unmediated and nothing can be enclosed. The innocence of Rousseauian *amour de soi* has disappeared as a possibility.

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One might unequivocally deplore such loss were one not to return to the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater* and examine one more 'enclosure' protecting innocence that Rousseau is concerned about maintaining within the walls of Geneva—the 'circles' or clubs he recommends for protecting the innocence of men. Some of the same dynamics of unmediated experience are made possible by the protection allowed by the clubs as we saw being nurtured within the sphere of childhood and in Geneva as a whole: the men's circles, like Emile's fence, allow for spontaneity, directness, and authentic self-expression. In the clubs, men 'dare to speak of country and virtue without passing for windbags; they even dare to be themselves without being enslaved to the maxims of a magpie' (105; V: 96). Rousseau's parallels are clear: like public opinion, like the theater, women are a corrupting force, and while Rousseau acknowledges that the men's circles might promote drunkenness or keep men away from home overnight, he states firmly that the solidarity such experiences encourage make them well worth the risk (108-9; V: 98-99).

I must admit that I feel no nostalgia for this form of innocence, for as a woman I would have been kept outside of the club. At this point

⁷Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

one is forced to confront the extent to which the preservation of innocence requires exclusion. Rousseau craved a privileged realm of immediacy and transparency, of direct interactions and openness, without veils, representatives, or representations. And yet our examination of these spheres also leads us to see that Rousseauian innocence by its very nature requires enclosure—fences, walls, and circles which protect some but which keep others out.

Given such recognitions, the post-modernist distrust of innocence begins to make sense. Angered by the subjugated knowledges that have excluded whole peoples and their literatures, dedicated to embracing difference, the other, and alterity, those whom Irving Howe referred as 'insurgents'⁸ stress the exclusivity of innocence; they make us realize that every privileged space has its outsiders, and as a consequence that every value, every potential 'fence,' must be deconstructed.

To be confronted by the arbitrariness of innocence is sobering for someone like myself who comes to Rousseau's discourse on innocence as a product of 20th century romanticism and as a critic of the post-modernist linguistic turn. For it forces me to acknowledge that at some deep level my nostalgia for Rousseauian innocence may in essence be nothing more than a regret at the disappearance of an enclosed world that privileged me. And yet it still remains to be seen whether a world that does not believe in the possibility of civic and childhood innocence is a better, safer, and possibly even freer world for everyone than a world that does. This is why I feel nervous.

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⁸Irving Howe, 'The Value of the Canon,' in Paul Berman, ed., *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses*, (New York: Laurel, 1992), 154.